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Book review

The Future of Nature: Documents of global change, edited by Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde. 2013. New Haven and London, Yale University Press. Price: £20.00. Pp. 564. ISBN: 978 0 300 18461 7

The Future of Nature is an important publication containing a set of documents and primary sources that charts aspects of human attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and predictions around the relationship between people and their physical environments over the past 300 years. It deserves a place on the bookshelves of natural and social scientists as well as humanities scholars because it provides significant insights into how human beings have conceived the world around them. As the editors – three internationally renowned environmental historians – explain in "How to use this book" it may be dipped into, or read from cover to cover. It must be acknowledged, however, that doing the latter would demand both considerable time and concentration as there are 38 documents arranged into 10 themes, plus a large number of commentaries, the total comprising more than 500 pages, plus a long (13 pages) select bibliography and a detailed index. This work is not a narrative or an extended analysis. Instead, it is a refreshing and original presentation of carefully selected relevant documents that "have shaped the way we think about our planet and our environment, and the sciences that study global change" (p. xv).

The documents are grouped into 10 parts, each relating to an issue that has characterised thinking about the planet, its biota and/or its resources. They are framed as questions, a method that maintains focus and emphasis. These are: Population: Are we too many, or are we too greedy?; Sustainability: Are we limited by resources?; Geographies: Are human and natural futures determined or chosen?; 'The 'Environment': How did it emerge?; Ecology: How do we understand natural systems?; Technology: Does technology create more problems than it solves?; Climate: How can we predict change?; Diversity: Why do we need it and can we conserve it?; Measuring: How do we turn the world into data?; and, lastly, The Anthropocene: How can we live in a world where there is no nature without people? These are the burning issues of our time, the foci of study in a large number of disciplines. This book is an innovative exploration using original material that documents how these issues emerged, developed and changed, with the result that the reader is reminded in the most interesting manner that ideas, technologies and institutions are historically contextual and that many predictions turn out unexpectedly and often very differently.

The editors explain their view of change that is global and link the documents with "global change science" – stating that this is "mostly large scale, exploring natural systems that encompass the entire Earth or significant portions of it … demands large-scale computer models … the idea of 'the global' is highly historical and linked to the second half of the twentieth century" (p. 1). They continue to explain how the "global" is both spatial and chronological, and how the notion of "the environment" – that seems always to have been with us – is relatively recent. On the other hand, we are also reminded of the longer history of other issues of concern. Forest sustainability is one such example, and an extract from Hans Carl von Carlowitz's *Sylvicutura oeconomica* dates from 1713. The editors explain that their concepts for exploring global change are predicated upon the idea of the future, the concept of prediction, the notion of expertise, and the environment (p. 6). How these have intertwined is the theme of the collection.

The editors selected the themes and documents but the commentaries were written by others – experts in their fields. Space does not permit comment on all 10 questions raised by the contents of this book but highlighting just one of them will provide an indication of what a reader may expect. Part 1, "Population: Are we too many, or are we too greedy?", begins with an introduction that explains how the number of people and the resources to sustain them have worried thinkers for many decades. The first document, comprising some eight pages, is, not surprisingly, by Thomas Malthus, 1798 and consists of extracts of Chapters 1 and 2 from his *An Essay on Population*. A three-page commentary on this document is provided by Björn-Ola Linnér, author of *The Return of Malthus* (2003) and who is an international policy analyst on sustainability issues. A list of further reading is provided with each commentary. Chapter 11 of *The Shadow of the World's Future* (1928) by George Knibbs follows. This was a short book written after the first World Population Conference of 1927, held in Geneva. Commentary on it comes from Alison Bashford, author of *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth* (2013). The third document in this part comes from Georg Borgström's *The Hungry Planet: The Modern World at the Edge of Famine* (first published in Swedish in 1953). This takes the issue of population into the arena of international economic relations through the importing and exporting of food, tracing precise areas in which food can productively be grown for export. This extract contains detailed data. Sverker Sörlin, professor of Environmental History at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm commentates on Borgström as the first generation of postwar prophets and alarmists of global change. The final document here is by Paul Ehrlich, an extract from *The Population Bomb* (1968; 1971) that was contemporaneous with the blooming of environmentalism in the USA at that time. Michael Egan, the commentator on Ehrlich, notes how "Doomsday prophecies have been a staple of American rhetoric since its inception" but he also shows how Ehrlich's message touched the public imagination and led to fierce debates over population control, whether by reducing the birth rate or raising the death rate. Egan is an expert on American environmentalism, having written extensively on this topic. All these documents were 'of their time' and the changing nature of science and thinking around human numbers is fascinating.

It is to be hoped that this synopsis of just one of the 10 parts of this book gives a flavour of its richness, depth and variety – none of which can be conveyed within a review of this nature. Documents written by renowned scientists and agenda-setting intellectuals – among them Rachel Carson, Alexander von Humboldt, Arthur Tansley, Eugene Odum, C. S. Holling, Alva Myral, G.S. Callender, Charles S. Elton, Ramachandra Guha, Nicholas Stern, Gretchen Daily, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer and Mike Hulme – abound.

This publication is informative, interesting, thought-provoking and imaginative and the editors are to be congratulated on producing a useful reference tool. What they have achieved must have been a difficult task but it has jelled into a volume that is a model of its kind.

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